



Time travelling with Royston Tan

We speak to filmmaker Royston Tan on preserving memories of old spaces

By Yang Vicki | 06 Nov 2015

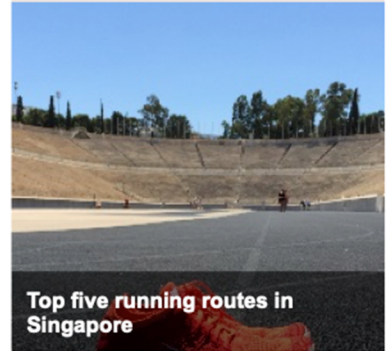
The video doesn't decay as fast as the spaces that house them. As the unrelenting years crack asphalt and crumble concrete, structures gain further significance. But before they become shadows, filmmaker Royston Tan is charged with a mission: to document the passing of things before they become history.

In his latest feature-length film, 3688, Royston gives the much-maligned local parking attendants their day in the sun — for the first half of the film at least. Parking attendant Fei Fei, played by singer Joi Chua, is constantly undermined by a wily band of 'summon aunties', as parking attendants are known in local lexicon, as they patrol in the Dakota Crescent neighbourhood. Soon, the plot unfurls the uneven road to stardom as Fei Fei joins a singing competition.



But it isn't about the transformative dreams of a 38-year-old girl from the suburbs (or car park) that takes precedence on screen. The film's preoccupation is with the forceful march of time — the reminiscences of Fei Fei's dementia-ridden father, his ritual of hawking Rediffusion radios as a former door-to-door salesman and the 'summon aunties' retrenched and replaced with electronic gantries.

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This 'don't wait already' phrase is something Royston repeats constantly as we chat and chronicle his filmography. From documentaries of old landmarks and suburban shops in *Old Places* (2010) and *Old Romances* (2012), to a short film on the oldest Hokkien opera troupe like Sin Sai Hong (2006), one might infer that Royston's filmography is deeply entrenched in nostalgia. But it's not a rose-coloured lens he shoots with. To the filmmaker just one year shy of 40, these works aim to highlight one's roots for those who have forgotten.

"I cannot fight the change but I can document these things before they are gone," affirms Royston. "Right now, people in Singapore are very desensitised, like it's better not to feel. But when you stop feeling, that's the moment you start dying. That's why I'm doing this."

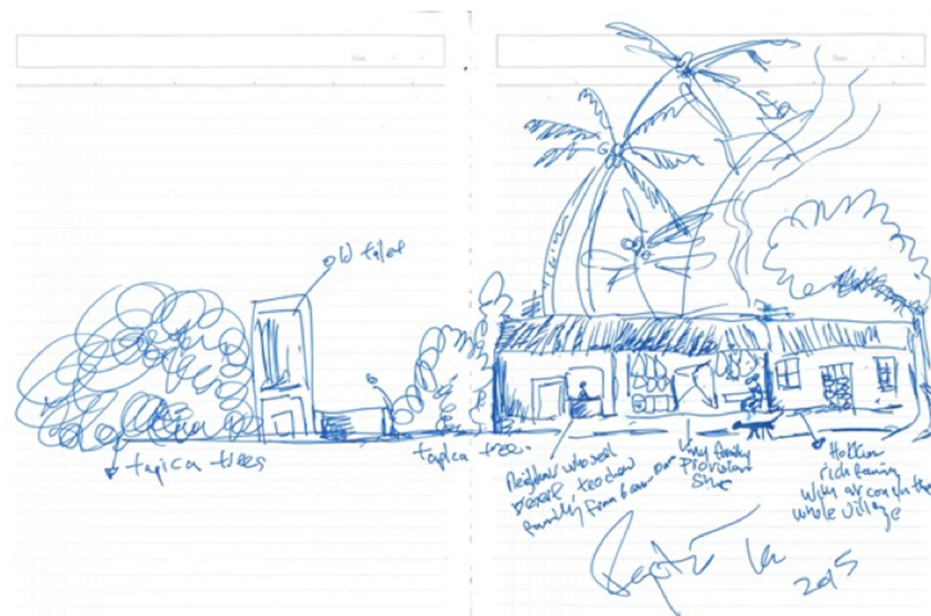


The village boy

The loss of places is something Royston feels most keenly about, in part due to a consequential episode in his childhood when the seven-year old left the kampong life of Lorong Kinchir, today Lorong Chuan in the Serangoon district, to HDB life in the early 1980s.

"I was from the transitional period — the last generation to stay in the kampong, the transition from non-digital to digital," says the filmmaker. "It was traumatising for me to move. The air was different, the people would not talk to each other, the doors were always closed. I grew up with fresh water from the well, and when there was water coming from the tap, it felt very strange," he recalls.

From one generation to another, the reminiscences of kampong life have largely been spoken these days (aside from a visit to Pulau Ubin or Lorong Buangkok), so I ask him to draw the village map of his memory.



Under a pen dripping ink, the lines of the houses and trees blur into each other, but Royston is only too happy to go into detail of the sketch from left to right: the communal toilet that was very scary to visit in the dark ("sometimes got pervert"); the Teochew neighbour who sold *tau suan* and other desserts with the use of fresh tapioca from the trees around; Royston's family provision shop fronted by tables surrounded by old uncles drinking beer, "just chatting with my mom and watching over us to make sure we don't run out to the main road"; the "very rich family" next door whose house was "very clean and there is air-con inside" and where the neighbours would crowd in to watch television, often American sitcoms that young Royston hardly understood, but "when they laugh, I just laugh *lor*."

"This is the environment we grew up in. Wah, I really miss the old days," concludes Royston wistfully. Today, what's left of his *kampung* is part of the CTE and an empty field.

Awakening memories

Perhaps in line with his desire to document the evolution of public spaces that remain personal to himself and others, it's fitting then that his recent short film project, *50 First Kisses*, brings people back to the places where they had their first kiss, romantic or familial. Part of the Singapore Heart Map project, a sneak preview of the film was screened in March this year. According to Royston, the full set of 50 beloved memories will be released in November, on the wide screen of the Float Stadium at Marina Bay.



"The whole idea was to reconnect people through memories, and go back to the same place even if the environment has changed, but the people will still be in the same pose," he explains.

In preparation for the film, Royston and his production team had to hunt down the exact spots where the kisses occurred and where the submitted photographs were taken. While the most popular spots were Toa Payoh Town Garden (now Toa Payoh Town Park), Changi Airport, and the Singapore Zoo, trawling through the other identified landscapes was a momentous effort, which Royston recollects with an exaggeratedly pained look.

"We had wonderful stories, such as the social worker who doesn't talk to his dad very much, but they had a picture at Haw Par Villa with a panda in it, and it was so difficult to find the panda! It took us two weeks to find, and when we found it, my hair stood," recounts Royston.

With Royston's engagement with flitting back and forth between the past and present, it is unsurprising when he reveals the next film that he is currently working on will revolve around "someone who is in the year 2016, but wants to go back to 1998".

Titled *1998* for now, the film is framed as "an emotional time travel with no use of flashbacks", he says firmly. "And it will bomb at the box office," he declares, but follows up with a statement to this fate, in advance. "People who hate it will just have to accept that I don't belong to one particular genre, but in between commercial and art films."

As such, to those who have noted Royston's journey from the gritty but elevated realism of gangster life in *15* (2003) to the many-splendoured *getai* musical numbers of *881* (2007), Royston has no reservations where he is now in the course he has charted through his filmography. It might be fitting then that he finalises our chat with what he desires to leave the audience with as the credits of his films roll.



"To embrace the loss. Even as we are talking now, every moment is a part of history," goes Royston's reminder to his audience, myself included. "That's the thing I really learnt from doing 3688. What are the pivotal things you will remember? Who do you think is the person who will dance with you when you lose your memory?"

Follow Royston's Instagram journey as he traipses through forgotten spots here:
<http://www.instagram.com/filmr>

Take a naughty peek into Royston's upcoming 50 First Kisses here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFhbFi5_Q3Y&feature=youtu.be